

LOOKING FOR RESURGENCE

## How to Restructure Prasar Bharati

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The Government has decided that Doordarshan and Akashvani will be provided limited financial assistance in future. These services are run by their parent organization Prasar Bharati. Presently the deficit in current expenditures is wholly met by the Government through budgetary support. It is now decided that only one-half of the current expenditures will be met by the Government. Prasar Bharati will have to raise one-half through advertisements. The property being used by the organization will be transferred at purchase price and restrictions on new recruitments will be removed. The requirement to procure advertisements will make the organization supple. Public education programmes can be run with one-half the money coming from the Government.

World over two ways of funding public information services are seen. TV owners have to pay an annual license fees in Britain which is the source of funding for BBC. Japan and Sweden apply the same model. The news service in Australia, on the other hand, is wholly funded by Government budget as in India. The distinction between license fees and budgetary support is really artificial because in both cases the news service gets the revenues free. The second way of funding is that of advertisements. Spain and New Zealand apply this model. Canada, France, Germany and Italy use a mix of these sources.

Both sources of revenues have their *pluses* and *minuses*. Budgetary support makes it possible to make public education programmes without worrying about commercial marketability. Akashvani had rendered a valuable service to the country in ushering in the *Green Revolution*. Farmers were provided free information about crop management. These programmes would probably have generated little revenue. The Review Committee on the Working of Prasar Bharati, with Shri N R Narayana-murthy and Shri Kiran Karnik as members, said in its report : "Public Service broadcasting is essential in India, and must be seen as a right for all citizens. Such a broadcasting platform must provide for free discourse and debate, while its content must empower the people." This is only possible if the broadcaster is not under pressure to make programmes that secure good advertisement revenues.

On the other hand, easy and secured sources of funds, breeds complacency and inefficiency. There is no pressure to make useful programmes. A 'bad' public education programme is as good as a 'good' public education programme. Wasteful and mindless expenditures are made. It is reported that number of Akashvani radio stations has increased from 126 to 287 between 1992 and 2008. Number of Doordarshan station increased simultaneously from 24 to 69. V Gopichand of Programme Staff Association of AIR and DD, Hyderabad writes in a release: "Various Radio stations and Doordarshan Kendras were inaugurated without providing for adequate Staff. Any organization which wants to break even financially will not indulge in such extravagant capital intensive misadventure." A programme executive of DD New Delhi lamented that most expenditures were being made on administration and little was spent on creative programmes. Senior officers of Prasar Bharati were making merry with their secure source of funds. They were busy serving themselves and had no interest in serving either the people or the market.

Government funding also lays open the organization to political interference. The classic case is that of Emergency when Akashvani continuously blared one-sided information to the

suiting of the party in power. No wonder, an IAS officer is appointed as head of Prasar Bharati.

That said there are problems with advertisement-led model as well. American Senator McCarthy was obsessed with socialism. He had called Nehru a 'commie' because of his support to China for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. McCarthy launched a movement seeking dismissal of an innocent officer of the American army because his family members read socialist literature. Enraged, TV Channel CBS launched a programme on McCarthy which ultimately led to his fall in disgrace. But the programme too had to be closed because supporters withdrew their endorsements. Lesson is that one can go only so far with advertisements.

India is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Reliance on Government grants makes the organization self-obsessed and inefficient and public education suffers as in India. On the other hand, reliance on advertisements places huge restrictions on making truly public education programmes as people faced during the Emergency.

The Government has taken the middle course in this difficult choice. It has decided that Government budgetary support will be limited to one-half of the revenue expenditures. Prasar Bharati will have to raise the remaining one-half from advertisements. It is like saying that one-half of the programmes may be made wholly for public education while one-half may be made for the market. Making programmes that are marketable will certainly lead to improvement in efficiency of Prasar Bharati. It will also become a trifle more difficult for the party in power to bend Prasar Bharati to its partisan purposes because the programme executives will have some autonomy from advertisement revenues. According to a release by 'Friends of Prasar Bharati,' the organization generated advertisement revenues of Rs 1050 crores against total current expenditures of Rs 2020 crores in 2009-10. In other words, Prasar Bharati is already generating about one-half of its expenditures from advertisements. Therefore, no cut in budgetary allocation has been made for the present. Rather, Prasar Bharati has got an opportunity to get higher budgetary support if it can generate more advertisement revenues. Simultaneously, property being used by it will be handed over at purchase cost. The building of Akashvani on Parliament Street in Delhi would be worth many thousand crores. This will be handed over at a paltry amount. The Government will continue to provide funds for capital expenditures. Cable operators will continue to relay three free channels of DD. These appear to be sufficient incentive for Prasar Bharati to continue to make good quality public education programmes. Therefore, the public and employees of the organization should welcome the move of the Government.

It would be ideal for Prasar Bharati to be hived off as an autonomous body directly answerable to the Parliament. That would free it from interference of the party in power. Nevertheless, the present move is a second-best. Ultimately autonomy and budgetary support cannot go together. He who pays the piper shall certainly call the tune. The solution to this dilemma will come from charity. Businessmen should donate to the making of public education programmes. The tyranny of the Government can only be broken by resurgence of public activism. It is futile to expect the Government to put restrictions on itself. □□□